

Shaharazad

ADEM OUHAIBIA

Telling stories: a question of survival



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For ‘Shaharazad’, Adem Ouhaibia, originally from Algeria, collaborates with German born Marita Schwanke. Both are recent PARTS graduates now based in Brussels. Intertwining their very different dance languages, they lead us on a journey, both personal and choreographed, and bequeath us with a map, traced in real time, that evokes their stories, both past and present.

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We’re welcomed with the loud strains of Joey Valence and Brae that draw us into what feels like a spur-of-the-moment, student dance battle, in full throw down in the depths of the decor-depo at the back of the theatre. Schwanke begins and immediately endears us with her lack bravura: she’s clearly a newcomer to street-dance but is unselfconsciously having fun and encourages us to do the same.

Ouhaibia leaps in, flips and spins spectacularly on his head; Schwanke retreats, proffering cans of spray paint to the audience, egging them to daube the walls. There is no doubt that Ouhaibia has the moves, but he too seems to shun the usual brag and swagger associated with hip-hop. Once back on his feet, he incites us to follow down a passage lined with clothes dangling from metal racks and hangers. A pop-up souk? A Sunday *‘brocant’* ? A closer look reveals some of the garments are paint-splattered boilersuits, fruits in bowls seem like offerings, packets of biscuits displayed feel like contra-band goodies. A story is unfolding. We emerge from the passageway into the theatre. At last we can take a safe seat as a simple spectator.

Now Schwanke is propped up against the back wall of the theatre, still and waiting. Languorously she slides along the wall, straining her hands and shoulders to push herself into a slow-motion, arched-back swivel. The wall has become her support as the floor once was. Ouhaibia enters from the front of the stage, slithering along on his back. Again we can see hints of the movements we’d clapped along to in the garage, but as Ouhaibia is prone, they appear at a different angle, and this time a low frequency humming conjures a muted mood.

Shoulders touching, leaning against the backwall, the pair come together again. White and beige clad conjoined twins that then move forward as one, counterbalancing each other's weight with head against head or shoulder against shoulder. Gradually they release each other, running and jumping apart, hopping in rhythm, skittling across the floor, creating their own percussive music but with movements pared of any street-savvy style.

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Suddenly we're plunged into darkness and listening to what could be the sounds of a busy marketplace. Ouhaibia's voice solemnly tells us that, in Algeria, this is the time when we would sit quietly together and tell stories. Schwanke chimes in and together their voices take apart the phrases repeating them over and over with slight shifts. As with the dance, everything that went before is present, but emphasis varies to highlight different words: 'stories', 'together', 'share'. The performers beckon to us to leave our seats and join them to sit on the stage.

As the light brightens and we sink onto cushions, we decern the pair taping a large rectangle of white paper onto the floor above which two mysterious pendulum objects are suspended. The performers step on the paper and remove a seal from the bottom of the pendulums, ceremonially setting them swinging over their heads. Slowly we realise that the seal has been preventing a trickle of black paint from escaping that now drips onto the white floor and the dancers themselves. The two begin to sway and, by increments, rejoin each other in a gentle dance of hand movements, leg sweeps, complicit glances: multiple signs and gestures drawn both in the air and on the canvas that create a living storyboard. We the audience seem captivated by this evolving display: there is hardly a rustle or cough to be heard.

The performance ends as it began, very simply, with a smile and a nod. Applause follows.

Even though the ideas that make up Shaharazad: the deconstruction of different dance techniques, live painting and so on are far from new, the candour of the two protagonists within the current world climate of conflict, makes this performance fresh and deeply touching. I never got the chance to enquire about the title, but perhaps, as in the tale of Shahrazad, telling stories is a question of survival.